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A New Light on Lancelot

A NEW LIGHT ON LANCELOT

Lancelot, by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Thomas Seltzer, New York.

The chief distinction of Edwin Arlington Robinson, chief, that is, among the many astonishments of his genius, is his mingling of two strains: a Puritan austerity, and a discerning tenderness. He was ever one to see "a light behind the stars," and yet he is too keen a psychologist to measure men's worth by the distances between their intuitions and his own lucid vision.

An avowed traditionalist, it is perhaps natural that at a time when men grope for refuge from a broken world, Robinson should find his in a retreat to the dim Arthurian fields. But it is equally characteristic that his retreat has in it no shadow of surrender. Rather, he recreates the disillusion, the desolation, and the pain of our own period in the tragedy of this half-forgotten legend. *Lancelot* is finer than *Merlin* by as much as it is closer to Robinson. For what he has done in this latest work is to dramatize the griefs of Guenevere and of Arthur, of Gawain and of Lancelot, in such a way as to make them our contemporaries, and with such a fervor of insight as to body forth the very breathings and heartbeats, the very fire and dolorous rains of an age wherein men wronged each other and helplessly hurt each other in ways no different from our own. Throughout the poem shines undimmed the light that burned for the poet before he touched the story of the Grail, and therewith the old divining pity.

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

So one hears Guenevere:

Knowing the world, you know
How surely and indifferently that Light
Shall burn through many a war that is to be,
To which this war were no more than a smear
On circumstance.

And later, Lancelot:

The Vision shattered, a man's love of living
Becomes at last a trap and a sad habit.

The reiterated chord of bitterness reverberates in the lines:

There was a madness feeding on us all,
As we fed on the world. When the world sees,
The world will have in turn another madness;
And so, as I've a glimpse, *ad infinitum*.

What strikes one most forcibly perhaps is indeed the sharpness of the poem's reality. This is largely due to the strength of the dialogue. Guenevere was not the first nor will she be the last woman to cry out:

If I were strong enough to make you vanish,
And have you back again with yesterday!

There is also the eternal magic whereby Robinson's unique images gleam out of the sterner structure of the poem, as saints might gleam out of the simple aspiring architraves of some noble cathedral. So he speaks of

The fading out of his three visitors
Into the cold and swallowing wall of storm.

So he shows Joyous Gard as "A shaken hive of legend-heavy wonder." So Lancelot asks:

Would you cajole
Your reason with a weary picturing

A New Light on Lancelot

On walls or on vain air of what your fancy,
Like firelight, makes of nothing but itself?

The piercing imagery of the leave-taking is typical as it is arresting:

He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
Away from him like flowers into a grave.

It is idle praise to crown a poet with premature immortality. But it is certain that any contemporary would be proud to have made this poem, and it is written that none but Edwin Arlington Robinson could have endued this ancient theme with so passionate a warmth and so kindling a light.

Babette Deutsch

COMEDY OVER TRAGEDY

A Woman of Thirty, by Marjorie Allen Seiffert. Alfred A. Knopf.

Marjorie Allen Seiffert has more than a bowing acquaintance with the comedy spirit, and, if for no other reason, may be safely considered, by the hypothetical third person of criticism, an acquisition to the new poetry. One poises the claim a little apologetically, for one still has to excuse the intrusion, more than once, of comedy into what most of us still consider a solemn, sacrosanct demesne. And yet, a goodly percentage of the better contributions of the men and women who have put America on the art map has come, from the mask of drollery to the full face of laughter, in the shapes and sounds of poems by Messrs. Sandburg, Lindsay, Frost, Pound, Williams, Johns, Eliot and Stevens;